

CHAPTER 9

IDEAS FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

from the Casey Family Programs' Breakthrough Series Collaborative

In This Chapter

- Recruiting Culturally and Racially Diverse Families
 - Working with Faith-based Organizations
 - Recruiting Families for Older Youth and Siblings
 - Retaining Resource Families
 - Listening to Youth in Placement
-



In her study of the foster care records of three states Gibbs (2005) found that 47%-62% of foster parents quit parenting within one year of the first placement in their home. She also found that in these states at least 20% of all foster homes quit fostering each year.

In their study of placement moves in Illinois, Zinn and colleagues (2006) found that child welfare workers reported that over three-quarters (75.9%) of children's most recent placement moves were due, at least in part, to foster parents' inability or unwillingness to continue fostering.

The Casey Family Foundation's Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) brought together teams from child welfare agencies across the country to improve recruitment and retention of foster families. The teams included a manager, a direct service provider, a foster family (referred to as a resource family), a worker from a public or private agency and, in some cases, a youth currently or previously in care. The teams generated ideas, quickly field tested them, and then made them available to all of the other teams to try. The participating child welfare agencies showed significantly improved outcomes in recruitment and retention of foster families.

The teams address goals that are familiar to every agency: providing more culturally sensitive recruitment; working effectively with faith-based organizations; finding homes for older youth and siblings; providing more support and inclusion for

foster families; improving foster family-birth family relationships; truly listening to the voices of children, foster families and birth families.

What makes this project especially useful is some of the very simple but effective strategies used to make those goals a reality. You can download the full report online at <<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/BSCRecruitmentRetention.htm>>.

The Casey document provides specific strategies and success stories. Following are some examples.

Recruiting Culturally and Racially Diverse Families

Participating teams achieved great improvements in recruiting families of color and families from different cultures using very straightforward ideas such as:

- Certifying resource families of color as co-leaders of foster parent training
- Conducting joint recruitment and joint responses to inquiries with social workers and existing resource families of color
- Having existing resource families of color contact prospective families who are going through the process but whose momentum has slowed, to offer help and encouragement
- Translating brochures, fliers to schools, applications, and MAPP/GPS into Spanish or other relevant languages
- Conducting informational meetings with a primary speaker of the relevant language
- Staffing a resource line for resource families with bilingual, culturally sensitive staff, and/or providing a dedicated line with a message in multiple languages

Here are some of the measurable improvements from using combinations of these strategies.

- Massachusetts experienced a 60% increase in Cambodian resource families and a 45% increase in Latino resource families.
- New Mexico experienced a 57% increase in American Indian resource families.
- Erie County, New York experienced a 33% increase in Hispanic resource families.
- Oklahoma experienced a 66.7% increase in American Indian resource families.

Working with Faith-based Organizations

Below are two examples of how teams met the goal of working more effectively with faith-based organizations.

“The team from Shasta County, California [met] with pastors of eight churches during their monthly prayer breakfast... A mild form of competition even evolved among the churches regarding how many families could be recruited. This strategy eventually proved successful for numerous teams within the BSC. The pastors were able to give

voice to the idea that children going into care were the community's children and, as such, the community had the responsibility to meet their needs."

"The Carver County, Minnesota team was seeking a steady home for a child who had been bouncing between short-term caregivers for some time. Team members partnered with a local church and described this child in the bulletin and from the pulpit....they created a picture of the child in the hearts and minds of the church members – and in doing so, they found a family for the child."

Recruiting Families for Older Youth and Siblings

To recruit homes for older youth and siblings, teams implemented some of the following ideas.

- Ask youth earlier and more often who matters most in their lives, before those connections dissolve.
- Use ecomaps and genograms to identify connections and ways to maintain sibling groups.
- Engage residential facilities to identify who is visiting youth, who the youth is contacting, and who the youth is talking about.
- Let families meet older youth and siblings in various situations, such as orientations and "while you are waiting parties." Include resource families who have experience with older youth and enjoy being around them.
- Create buddy systems and mentor programs that pair new and experienced resource families, to help the families and youth form connections.
- Engage former resource families and churches to serve as mentors for youth.

Here are some of the measurable improvements from these strategies.

- The number of resource families who felt competent and willing to care for teens improved by 71% in Wyoming, 158% in New Mexico and 96% in Catawba County, North Carolina.
- The number of sibling groups placed together increased 100% in Catawba County, North Carolina, 80% in Hamilton County, Ohio, and 33% in Erie County, New York.
- Texas reduced the time that siblings were apart by 73%.

Retaining Resource Families

Teams also looked at how to retain resource families. Following are some of their successful ideas that focus on support, responsiveness, and inclusion.

- Respond to initial inquiries from prospective resource families within 24 hours. Follow up with families who make initial inquiries but don't continue in the process.
- Invite the resource family to take part in the case planning process, and share existing case plans with the resource family.

- Develop two-call policies that allow resource families to contact the supervisor if they do not hear back from their worker within 24 hours.
- Use e-mail in addition to phone calls to communicate.
- Provide information about the child and his family of origin to the resource family prior to placement.
- Provide mentors or “buddies” for new resource families.
- Hold a facilitated dialogue between resource families and staff to discuss and understand people’s underlying values and concerns.

Listening to Youth in Placement

What about listening to youth in placement? A young woman participating on a team asked one of the most meaningful questions: “Why don’t you tell us anything about the resource family before you place us there? Do you have any idea what it feels like to be picked up from everything you know and dropped off with a total stranger?”

This led to two of the most powerful suggestions:

- “Create resource family profile sheets so that youth know something about their foster parents... ‘Tell us what they eat, what kind of music they listen to, what their house looks like.’” This could be done by resource families during their pre-service training.



Create youth profile sheets so that youth can tell their prospective families something about themselves in their own words.

- “Create youth profile sheets so that youth can tell their prospective families something about themselves in their own words. A young person in the BSC reminded everyone that all resource families typically knew about them was their thick case file, which often said nothing good. The young people in the BSC wanted an opportunity to tell families what they liked to eat, what they liked to watch on TV, what their hobbies were, and what their hopes and dreams were.”

Source: Casey Family Programs. (2005). Recruitment and retention of resource families: Promising practices and lessons learned. Breakthrough Series Collaborative, Number 001. Seattle, WA.

Ideas from Foster Parents**Recruitment**

- Ask current foster parents to meet individually or in a group setting with prospective foster parents to network and answer questions.
- Allow prospective foster parents to shadow or observe current foster parents in a day of their lives. This should be a normal, realistic day.
- Ask a current foster parent to keep a journal of situations, feelings, and the ups and downs of fostering, then make this journal available to prospective foster parents (edited if necessary).

Ideas from Foster Parents**Support and Retention**

- Invite foster parents to do an in-service for your agency's social workers to teach them what's really important to families and children in placement.
- Assign seasoned foster parents as mentors to new foster parents.
- Reward foster parents that have been fostering five or more years with donated items such as gift certificates for restaurants, massages, etc.
- Offer opportunities for foster families to socialize and network.
- Provide or help start a monthly support group for foster parents in your county.
- Keep foster parents "in the loop" by offering a newsletter, information sessions, or a county website.
- Have a process for parents to vent, such as a hotline or written feedback box.
- Whenever possible, schedule simultaneous visits with other workers. Schedule meetings at family-friendly times, such as when parents are not working.
- Provide gas vouchers for meetings or therapy appointments, especially for children with many services and activities.
- Advocate for foster parents– work with other professionals to be sure foster parents are informed and included in decision-making.